DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 300 486 UD 026 469

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TITLE Youth Motivation: At-Risk Youth Talk to Program Planners.
INSTITUTION Public/Private Ventures, Philadelphia, PA.
PUB DATE 88
NOTE 43p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS Disadvantaged Youth; Discussion Groups; *Dropout Characteristics; *Dropout Programs; Dropouts; *Enrollment Influences; *High Risk Persons; High Risk Students; Out of School Youth; Parent Influence; Peer Influence; *Persistence; Remedial Programs; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students; Socioeconomic Influences; Teacher Influence; Urban Youth; *Youth Programs
IDENTIFIERS Focus Groups Approach; Youth Conservation Corps

ABSTRACT

High attrition from programs for at-risk youth suggest that planners are not assessing interventions from the consumers' perspective. Some disadvantaged youth join and complete programs (persisters), while others from the same communities either fail to join or drop out (leavers). Participants in two in-school remedial programs and two out-of-school youth service corps programs were encouraged to talk about their experiences in 16 focus group sessions. Groups included both persisters and leavers. The report discusses difficulties in assessing focus group data. The major finding that cuts across all groups and programs is that leavers and persisters express similar reactions to all phases of program participation. Findings concerning the in-school participants in remedial programs include the following: (1) participants are motivated to enroll and persist by parental encouragement, and by positive relationships with staff and peers; (2) participants are most vulnerable to dropping out early in the program; (3) leavers drop out after a series of frustrations and failures; (4) many leavers drop out because of factors extrinsic to the program; and (5) individuals differ in their ability to tolerate program stress. Findings concerning the out-of-school participants in youth corps programs include the following: (1) participants are motivated to enroll independently of peer or adult influence, and to persist by the nonmonetary incentives of promotions and awards within the organization; and (2) relationships with staff are related to the decision to persist or drop out. (FMW)

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Youth Motivation

At-Risk Youth Talk to Program Planners

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UD026469

Summer 1988

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Youth Motivation

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by Catherine Higgins

Summer 1988

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This exploratory study of youth motivation was funded by The Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Public/Private Ventures wishes to thank the Foundation and in particular Jon Blyth, program officer, for their support.

The report was prepared under the supervision of Alvia Branch, vice president and director of research at P/PV. Thomas Gordon conducted the focus groups, assisted by P/PV staff persons Bernard McMullan and Julita Milliner. Natalie Jaffe and Michael Callaghan provided valuable editorial assistance; Carol Dash, Charlotte W. Thurmond and Paula Strawberry processed the text.

P/PV extends grateful appreciation to the four programs whose participants took part in the study. We have not identified them because the intention of the report is not to evaluate programs but to understand how the youth experience them. P/PV especially thanks program staff, who provided administrative clearance for the groups and assembled the participants, and the youth, whose willingness to cooperate in focus group sessions made this report possible.

CONTENTS

		Page
	EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	i
I.	MAKING THE CONNECTION	1
II.	METHODOLOGY	5
III.	"LIKE AN ADVENTURE": IN-SCHOOL LEAVERS AND PERSISTERS	11
IV.	"JUST HOLD ON": OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEAVERS AND PERSISTERS	19
V.	FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS	29

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report addresses a central question in programming for at-risk youth: why some youth from disadvantaged backgrounds join and complete remedial programs while others from the same communities either fail to join or drop out prematurely.

Attrition extracts a heavy price in program operations: it raises per-person costs, lowers performance averages, and exposes programs to charges of "creaming" more tractable youth from a target group while failing to help those most in need. In human terms, high attrition rates represent failed opportunities to extend social benefits to the most disadvantaged. But despite multiple creative efforts to reduce attrition rates, little is known about differences between program persisters and leavers.

In this study, 16 focus group sessions in which youth were encouraged to talk about their program experiences were held. Groups included "persisters" and "leavers" from in-school remedial programs and out-of-school youth service corps. Groups were led by a psychologist trained to work with at-risk adolescents and sessions were audiotaped for analysis. The report discusses difficulties in assessing focus group data and suggests guidelines for future research.

One major finding cut across age groups and programs: that is, that leavers and persisters express remarkably similar reactions to all phases of program participation. They are attracted by the same inducements, respond positively to the same in-program incentives and react negatively to the same events. Almost all persisters at some time consider leaving the program, and almost all leavers delay their departure beyond their initial dissatisfaction. Leavers and persisters who are similar in socioeconomic background and school performance also sound alike when asked to describe their experiences in special programs.

Other findings are more age-specific. In-school youth reported that parental encouragement frequently provided a positive incentive; their comments suggest that parents may be an underutilized resource in motivating students to enroll and remain in remedial programs. In-school youth are also motivated to remain in programs by positive academic experiences and by monetary incentives associated with part-time work. But the most attractive aspects of program participation identified by students are a supportive relationship with a teacher or supervisor and a sense of team spirit within a class.

Conversely, in-school youth are especially vulnerable to attrition during the initial phases of program participation, when they must reconcile prior expectations and the reality of program

operations. Program publicity and visible program identifiers have an adverse effect for many youth who are sensitive to stigmatization by peers. Therefore, recommendations to planners include additional incentives during the initial phase of program participation and the use of material incentives that promote affiliation without increasing visibility, such as picnics and field trips.

Several findings about in-school leavers emerged from the data. First, few youth leave a program impulsively; most leave only after a succession of frustrations and failures, many of which are reported to program authorities. This interval between dissatisfaction and termination appears to offer a window of opportunity for interventions to promote staying.

Second, a substantial number of in-school departures result from situations that are extrinsic to a program, such as health problems, family relocations and adolescent parenting. Because many of these causes are associated with the socioeconomic profile of at-risk students, they may be impossible to curtail despite conscientious interventions.

Finally, individuals may differ in their ability to tolerate program-related stress. Many persisters appear to have a reservoir of reasons for staying that they reach into when they are tempted to leave. For each individual, the balance between personal motivation and program demands will tip at a different point. Teachers and administrators must be sensitive to these differences and, when possible, adapt program operations without compromising program goals.

Older, out-of-school youth who enroll in youth corps respond to different incentives. Most first heard about the corps through informal channels--usually friends or former participants. In addition, the decision to enroll was usually reached independently of peer or adult influences. Finally, most corps recruits reported that they were attracted by the program's open admissions policy and nonspecific program mix, which offered skills training as well as a transitional experience between adolescence and adulthood.

These older youth expressed a keen sensitivity to the nonmonetary incentives of promotions and awards within the organization. Although corpsmembers complained vociferously about the modest monetary stipend they receive for participation, the data do not conclusively show a relationship between dissatisfaction with the stipend and program attrition.

As with in-school youth, however, a strong correlation does emerge between relationships with staff and decisions to stay in or leave the program. In the process of consolidating an adult identity, out-of-school youth may be especially dependent on the

support of staff and efforts to promote team affiliation, especially in nonresidential programs.

Finally, youth corps participants are insistent that an open admissions policy should include a hard line on expelling disruptive enlistees. Their strong feelings about expulsions suggest that program leavers may unwittingly provide persisters with an opportunity to differentiate themselves from self-defeating behaviors. In this context, program attrition may be a necessary cost of promoting the group cohesion that allows some at-risk youth to succeed.

Questions about attrition in programs for at-risk youth shift the level of discussion from the group, with its objective, quantifiable characteristics, to the individual, whose subjective reaction to a putative social benefit is less easily described. This shift comes in the wake of deepening poverty among the most disadvantaged--despite several decades of programs intended to address their needs. While disaffection from ineffectual institutions and programs is understandable, high attrition from even exemplary programs suggests that planners have failed to assess interventions from the consumers' perspective. Much must still be learned, for example, about how at-risk participants and teachers, supervisors and project leaders can form working alliances that result in positive change. This report represents an initial step in understanding how this connection can be made.

I. MAKING THE CONNECTION

Many youth identified as at risk of educational or employment failure have benefited from social programs designed for them. Sadly, however, even larger numbers of youth who are eligible for these programs either fail to join or drop out prematurely. This report explores why this connection so frequently fails.

The relationship between socioeconomic deprivation and school and vocational failure is well-established. Nevertheless, just as some youth from disadvantaged backgrounds drop out of high school, others from the same communities manage to graduate and hold a steady job. Sociological research has failed to identify which individuals within a disadvantaged group will either complete school or join and complete a remedial program.

Questions about program attrition, therefore, shift the level of analysis from the target group to the individual and adjust the research goal to discovering and describing individual variation in a group that is homogeneous on most demographic measures. Quantitative measures that summarize group behaviors must yield to case reports on individuals. "Hard data" and "outcome measures" must give way to more descriptive findings that reflect the process of program participation.

For this reason, youth targeted by dropout prevention and youth corps programs have been asked to describe their experiences in these programs. This report uses participants' own words to reconstruct the process whereby youth and the program make a connection that either endures to completion or breaks under stress.

CONTEXT

The use of the word "motivation" in reference to at-risk youth evokes ideas that reflect differing perspectives on poverty. For some, "motivation" explains the academic or vocational success of those individuals from poverty backgrounds who apparently succeed because they have clear goals and the drive to achieve them. Youth from the same backgrounds are said to fail because they lack these personal resources. This view of motivation lends itself to "blaming the victim" arguments, whereby the individual who remains in poverty is held accountable for his or her status.

For others, "motivation" describes an individual's reaction to the institutional failure with which his or her poverty status is usually associated. How can youth be expected to succeed, this argument goes, in neighborhoods with high unemployment, substandard housing, broken families and wretched schools? For youth to be motivated to achieve, they must experience social benefits

such as attractive, interesting schools and clean, safe housing in the present so that they will strive for rewards such as steady, well-paying jobs in the future. With few positive memories and little prospect of change, the argument concludes, many youth will understandably drop out of school or seek the fast but illusive rewards of illegal activity.

Special programs for at-risk youth attempt to address both concepts of motivation. Institutional barriers to success are reduced through active recruitment, adapted curricula and specially selected staff; individual motivation is encouraged by means of monetary incentives, achievement awards and a positive group identification. Therefore, these programs have two aims: to redress institutional contributors to academic and vocational failure and to foster individual motivation through frequent rewards.

Results from these programs have been mixed. Many youth attain academic credentials, learn job-readiness skills and develop a positive sense of self that provides a foundation for future achievement. For others, however, special programs bring no positive change. These youth either are not attracted by the program's promises and do not join, or they join but drop out before completion.

From the perspective of program funders, youth who quit extract a high price. Special programs for youth are expensive; high attrition rates increase average costs-per-completer and thus constitute a high "overhead" on balance sheets. Also, evaluations of program effectiveness measure average effects that can be negatively skewed by non-completers. Hence, costs are higher and impact measures lower than they would be if attrition were delayed or reduced.

In addition, high attrition rates expose social programs to criticism for "creaming" the most easily helped individuals from the target group. As a result, critics argue, outcome measures often reflect the success of those individuals who might have succeeded even without expensive interventions, while those most in need either fail to enroll or drop out. To counter these arguments, program defenders have had to justify interventions in terms of the most intractable clients--those most at risk of attrition.

These assessments of attrition fail to address the perspective of the programs' potential consumers--youth at risk of academic and vocational failure. What makes a program attractive to a teenager from an impoverished background who is failing or has failed at school? What is the incentive to complete a second-chance program for a young adult with no job skills? Why do so many youth reject a program's inducements when they have no other

options? Few planners have directly asked youth these questions and systematically analyzed the findings.

This report is based on a third concept of "motivation," one that emphasizes the interaction between at-risk youth and the special programs designed for them. This model of "success" evolves from a combined effort between both the creativity and dedication of program planners and staff and the determination of youth to capitalize on an opportunity. Failure occurs not from a lack of effort from either the program or youth, but from a missed connection between the two. Youth's perceptions on how this interaction succeeds and fails form the core of this report.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

In analyzing youth's perceptions on program participation, the following questions served as guidelines.

- Program Alliance. What is the process by which at-risk youth join and become engaged in social programs? What special features or incentives are especially attractive to at-risk youth? How do initial expectations shape commitment decisions? Are there specific points in the program at which youth are more likely to drop out?

- Personal Resources. What are the personal resources in youth that reinforce program commitment? Can these resources be identified at enrollment? Does incentive to complete change during program participation?

- Staying and Leaving. What reasons do youth give for quitting a program? Do those who persist ever think about leaving? When do leavers decide to leave? Is there any way to identify potential leavers?

- Program Planning. Can existing programs for at-risk youth be adapted to reduce attrition? What modifications in program structure and material incentives would attract more youth and help programs retain potential dropouts?

In the sections that follow, youth's observations on their own program experiences are presented and analyzed. Chapter II describes how these observations were collected. Chapter III presents youth's observations of in-school programs, following the stages at which they are recruited, join and make the decision to stay or leave. Differences between persisters and leavers are discussed as they emerge. Chapter IV presents similar information for youth corps programs. Chapter V summarizes the findings and presents recommendations for program planners.

II. METHODOLOGY

To gather data on youth's perceptions of dropout prevention and youth corps programs, a series of 16 focus groups was held. Focus groups draw on principles of group dynamics to elicit discussion that might not emerge in one-to-one interviews or on self-administered questionnaires. The technique has been used extensively in market research but less often in the social sciences, despite its relevance for groups like adolescents, who are often reticent when interviewed individually but become relaxed and engaged among peers.

GROUP COMPOSITION

Participants for focus groups were selected from two dropout prevention and job training programs for disadvantaged youth and from two youth corps. Two sets of youth were included: **in-school youth** enrolled in dropout prevention programs and **out-of-school youth** enrolled in a youth corps. Within each group, youth were subdivided according to whether they were **program persisters**, who had completed a program or were currently enrolled, or **program leavers**, who had dropped out before program completion.

In-school youth were recruited from either the BRIDGE Project or STEP. BRIDGE is a year-round program for eighth- and ninth-graders who are performing at least two grade levels behind in school. The key features of BRIDGE are a weekly, two-hour class and paid summer employment. STEP is a summer program for JTPA-eligible ninth- and 10th-graders that provides remediation, life skills instruction, paid employment, and support during the school year. Participants in both programs are between the ages of 14 and 16. The programs were selected because they serve disadvantaged, high-risk youth and are of sufficient duration that many enrollees will likely not complete them.

Out-of-school youth were recruited from two youth corps programs. Corps are closely supervised work experience programs that combine youth development and work production goals; they usually pay wages or stipends equivalent to minimum wage for a 40-hour work week and they may also include formal or informal educational components. Most corps involve youth in both conservation and human service tasks, though they differ in the proportion of work time they allocate to either activity. In addition, some corps have residential facilities, where participants live on-site; others are nonresidential, requiring recruits to commute to worksites.

The two corps represented here illustrate all these options. One, located on the West Coast, emphasizes conservation work in residential settings; the other, located in a major urban area in

the Northeast, is a nonresidential program in which the primary focus is on human service tasks.

Corps participants are typically between the ages of 17 and 23. While most corps programs do not have eligibility criteria based on educational or economic status, many corpsmembers are disadvantaged and would be considered at risk in the labor market. Attrition rates in corps programs are high and poorly understood.

GROUP DESIGN

The 16 focus groups from eight sites included the following distribution of 125 youth: 46 in-school persisters, 18 in-school leavers, 36 out-of-school persisters and 25 out-of-school leavers.

Format

All focus groups were led by Thomas Gordon, a clinical psychologist with extensive training in group dynamics and experience in dealing with disadvantaged youth; six groups also included a coleader from the P/PV staff. Group size ranged from three to nine participants and each session lasted approximately two hours. Sessions were recorded on audiotapes which were then transcribed for analysis. In-school youth groups were held in schools and out-of-school youth met at a youth corps site. Youth were paid $35 at the end of the session for their participation in the focus groups.

Outline

A topic outline was prepared for group leaders to follow in guiding group discussion. The outline was intended to focus discussion on specific phases of program participation, such as recruitment, expectations, continuation and termination. An effort was made to discover attitudinal differences between leavers and persisters at each phase of the program and to determine whether these differences can be associated with program attrition. The outline included the following topics:

- Program entry. How were youth recruited into the program? What were their expectations? What support for enrollment did they receive from family and peers, and what other prospects did they have for employment and academic remediation?

- Program participation. What were the most attractive components of the program? Did persisters ever think about leaving and when did leavers first think about leaving? Did anything in the program delay a decision to leave,

reinforce a decision to stay, or accelerate a decision to leave? What were the major disappointments in the program and what were major benefits from the program for leavers and persisters? What other options were available to leavers and do they regret their decision to leave?

- Program incentives. How much do cash incentives influence program enrollment and retention? How attractive are noncash incentives and what additional incentives would motivate youth to enroll and remain in a program?

LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

Because of the exploratory nature of the questions being addressed, a focus group design was selected. Focus groups lend themselves to inquiries that aim to discover and document new information that might not emerge in more structured methodologies. Because the data are exclusively verbalizations of individuals' perspectives, several limitations related to study design and group composition are noted here.

First, the reports are retrospective; thus, leavers' recall of their program experience may be distorted by their subsequent decision to terminate. Similarly, persisters' recall may be biased due to their ongoing program participation. Prospective measurements could more carefully assess associations between attitudes toward a program--especially those attitudes expressed by complaining--and decisions to stay or terminate.

Second, groups have not been matched for background characteristics or length of program enrollment. Because admission to the corps studied here is not means-tested (i.e., individuals from any economic background can enroll), focus group youth drawn from the youth corps are particularly diverse. Participants in youth corps groups include middle-class as well as disadvantaged youth. Also, because corps enrollment is not synchronized with school semesters but occurs at multiple times during the year, focus groups drawn from the corps may contain recent enrollees as well as experienced corpsmembers.

Finally, because social scientists have largely ignored focus group designs, methodologies for analyzing data from focus groups have not been standardized. The following section represents an attempt to apply guidelines for evaluating this qualitative data set.

CAREFUL LISTENING: YOUTH'S COMPLAINTS IN CONTEXT

Because of the complexity of spoken communication, careful listening is not easy. The difficulty derives from the multiple levels on which messages are conveyed between speakers and listeners. On one level are the words, feelings and gestures every speaker uses simultaneously to express meaning. On another level is the context of a speaker's message, which embraces the intent of the message as well as the relationship between the speaker and the listeners. A third level comprises the listeners' backgrounds and the perspectives through which they filter the meaning of the speaker's words.

Careful listening is required when professionals turn on a tape recorder and ask youth from another socioeconomic group to talk, as happened here. Transcripts of the audiotapes document the **words** used in the communication: the nonstandard language and the manifest content of youth's reports. Encoded in the tapes themselves is the **sound** of the communication: the laughter, pride, derision, disappointment and anger that accompanied youth's descriptions of their experiences in programs. The **context** of the message includes not only the stated purpose of the focus groups, but also the individual histories that brought each youth to a special program and the social histories of the socioeconomic groups to which the youth, the interviewers and the listeners belong.

Interpretation of the focus group sessions must take all these processes into account. A faithful rendition of what youth "said" must include not only verbal content but also feelings expressed and the context in which the words are spoken. Several examples illustrate the difficulty of integrating these elements without losing the contribution of any one to the overall meaning.

First, when youth praise a program, are they describing real programmatic strengths that keep them enrolled and contribute to their learning and growth, or are they expressing what they think listeners want to hear? How should a listener interpret praise for a program that comes from a youth who left it prematurely? If students describe a class as "fun," is it correct to infer that they learned anything?

Second, when youth complain about programs, are they identifying real program faults that deserve criticism, are they engaging in the adolescent proclivity to complain, or are they expressing the stress they are experiencing as they come to terms with a program's demands? For example, when students complain that a class is "boring," are they describing a failure of pedagogy or their discomfort with the necessary drudgery of academic work? Similarly, how should a listener interpret the vociferous complaining by youth still enrolled in programs they variously

describe as "shitty" or "boring": as a valid criticism of a program by people who know it best or as an indicator that individuals are grappling with personal growth?

Third, focus group participants were selected by staff of program sites that had been funded or evaluated by the same organization that conducted the focus group sessions and is presenting this report. When youth asked, as they frequently did during group sessions, "what's going to happen to these tapes?," they were reflecting an awareness of the complex relationship between the interviewer and sponsoring program. In many cases, youth appeared to believe they were indirectly giving advice to program operators. This perception was shared by operators, who frequently asked, "what did they say?" Do youth's verbal reports therefore express what they wanted teachers and supervisors to hear, what they thought these people wanted to hear, or what they sincerely felt and observed themselves?

Finally, any document that purports to describe motivation in at-risk youth in the late 1980s has a political context. Therefore, listeners' reactions will inevitably reflect their prior ideas about youth, poverty, unemployment, race and social class. Advocates for youth will be understandably anxious to protect a group they feel has often been unfairly blamed for remaining in poverty. Administrators whose programs are always vulnerable to funding cutbacks will worry that youth's comments will be misperceived as a program evaluation. It follows that interpretations of what youth "said" will vary according to the listener's bias.

Nevertheless, the fact that the recorders have been turned on is encouraging to advocates for youth. Challenges lie ahead in understanding what the messages mean in the context of anti-poverty efforts.

III. "LIKE AN ADVENTURE": IN-SCHOOL LEAVERS AND PERSISTERS

Dropout prevention programs target youth whose poor academic record and disadvantaged background indicate they are at-risk for school failure. Youth who persist in these programs might be expected to report very different experiences than those reported by youth who decide to leave before program completion. In the focus groups, however, the reverse held true: persisters and leavers expressed similar feelings toward programs at almost every stage of participation.

"A BIG CHALLENGE": PROGRAM INITIATION

For most students, a decision to join came in response to encouragement from an adult, usually a teacher or parent. "They contacted you, they called you down," said one BRIDGE leaver of his teachers' approach. A BRIDGE persister described his teacher's enrollment strategy: "I didn't feel like I had a choice, because he came up to me and told me my grades were bad. I felt bad so I said I'll join because he said it'd pick up my grades." In contrast, a STEP persister reported that a more positive approach was employed by a teacher who told her that "If I joined the program, I would get high school credits and a summer job and it would be lots of fun."

Encouragement from parents also took several forms. A STEP leaver joined because his parents "didn't want me to be goofin' around during the summertime." A STEP persister discussed the program with her father, who "gave me the choice, asked me and I said, 'I'll do it.'" Mother played a decisive role in another STEP persister's decision-making:

> I joined because I needed the money and my mom said she wasn't going to give me no more money if I could have a job and I could quit asking her for money and I just needed something to do. I wasn't doing anything, just staying at home and watching TV. She tell me to get out and make some money. She wasn't going to give me no more.

Another STEP persister also joined to please his mother: "it just sounded like fun, and my mom, she really wanted me to go."

Only one student, a STEP persister, reported joining because of personal initiative. "The reason why I joined STEP," she explained, "was because the first ninth-grade summer I sent my application in late, so I felt left out. All my friends were working, so I had to go out and find me a job. So I didn't work that whole summer. The next year, I sent my application in early and I felt like I was somebody then."

Although adults were instrumental in enrollment, most students were able to identify personal reasons for joining. For some, the appeal was nonspecific. One BRIDGE leaver "decided to get into it because I thought it was a challenge. Learn a better attitude toward people, that was a big challenge, and how to read more. I want to read." Another BRIDGE leaver "thought it would be better than working or shoveling or raking leaves or mowing grass and I thought there'd be some girls here." For some students, the academic package was the primary attraction. A BRIDGE persister expected "my grades to improve, which they did, and I also expected help with my career." Still others were attracted because they had heard it was a new program that would be operating in several states.

For many, the primary incentive was the opportunity to earn money. A BRIDGE leaver "decided to get involved because I wanted to learn to do things on the job, and to do things on my own and to go out and make money." A BRIDGE persister saw money as a step toward independence. He joined to "get off the streets and playing basketball and time on the streets. Get a chance to work and make easy money, make some money besides depending on my mother all the time." A STEP persister expressed the same idea somewhat differently; she joined "so I could get spending money so I wouldn't be so bored at home."

Some youth took a longer view. A BRIDGE persister anticipated learning "a type of skill, like a janitor skill. I knew it wouldn't be an advanced skill." Another persister expected "help with things in the future, like manage your money and how to get a job and how to spend your money right." For still another persister, the program looked like a road out of poverty: "I wanted BRIDGE because I've grown up in a low-income family and I didn't want to end up like that."

In summary, in-school youth expressed a variety of reasons for joining a dropout prevention program. For some, the primary impetus came from a wish to improve their academic performance and learn vocational skills. Others were attracted by the monetary incentives offered in the program package. For almost all youth, however, the actual decision to enroll came in response to encouragement from a parent or teacher who was convinced of the program's benefits.

"LIKE A FAMILY": OVERALL ASSESSMENT

Leavers and persisters gave varying accounts of their experiences in programs. Both groups complained about negative situations and said they appreciated the opportunity to earn money and to learn academic and vocational skills. They differed in their assessment of teachers and supervisors, however, with persisters

much more likely to discuss qualities they considered admirable in adults.

"Get Your Check": Material Incentives

The material incentives that first attracted many youth to programs also reinforced their commitment once they had joined. A STEP persister described how her interest in school was enhanced when she learned she would be paid sooner than her friends who worked a full day.

> I expected to have fun and just to work all day. The lady told me that I had to go to school part time and I heard it from my friend that it's all right because you get your check right after school and you go to the bank. For the people who work all day, they had to wait until the full job was over to get theirs.

Another STEP persister compared his program's monetary advantage to the BRIDGE program in the same city: "They got less pay than STEP, so that's why I joined it. They would have to pay for their own transportation and at STEP we didn't have to."

Nonmonetary incentives, such as tee shirts and jackets, had a mixed appeal for both persisters and leavers. Although some responded positively to these incentives, others expressed discomfort about any display of program affiliation. "If you wear your BRIDGE shirt, people say what is that? Makes you stick out," a persister explained. A BRIDGE leaver objected to the program name because it "sounds like we handicapped." Both leavers and persisters were teased after their BRIDGE program was featured on television. "That news thing, that's when it got to everybody. They thought we had already dropped out of school," a leaver complained. A persister expressed this same idea in the local jargon: "On television, they was calling us malts. We're not malts; we're not dumb and stupid."

"False Advertising": Negative Experiences

Both leavers and persisters had complaints about the in-school programs. A persister found the academic work repetitious: "I thought that BRIDGE was going to lead me to a career, that it would be very educational, but the beginning wasn't, it was nothing that I didn't already know." A STEP leaver found his job experience disappointing: "The thing about it was the jobs they give you, you wouldn't need a higher education to get anyway, so that therefore you wouldn't strive for higher education to get these jobs."

Several leavers complained about a discrepancy between what they had expected and the reality of the experience. As one STEP youth put it: "They make you expect so much that once you got

there, it wasn't what you expected so you felt let down. They pumped you up, but once you got there, it wasn't half of what you thought." Another STEP leaver attributed his disappointment to "false advertising," which had led him to expect "jobs you want, good money, good schedules, good homework, learn a lot, help you throughout the rest of the year."

Persisters were especially critical of programmatic shortcomings. Persisters in one BRIDGE program complained after their class was integrated into "regular" school. "Class used to be separated, just BRIDGE students. Got to know each other, went on field trips...teachers got to know us. Now it's like regular school. Doesn't feel as much like a family." Another persister criticized teachers who "let students run over them". A STEP persister objected to her supervisor, who would "just jump in out of nowhere [when you were talking to someone] and tell you what you should do and shouldn't do." Several STEP persisters complained about the early hour of the first class (8:30 a.m.). Another persister resented "taking the bus every day to get to your job site. And I could not stand the lunches," she added. "They weren't food."

"Like Teamwork": Positive Experiences

Both leavers and persisters also praised certain aspects of their programs. Many gave a positive endorsement based on their educational experience. Even though they had discontinued their affiliation with the program, leavers could, like persisters, cite learning that had both practical and academic value for them.

Several BRIDGE leavers recounted practical lessons, such as "how to dress for interviews, what to say, how to ask them questions"; "how to talk things out without fighting"; "how to respect other people and be respected"; and "how to be honest, to be honest about money with your employer." Personal benefits cited by leavers included "a better attitude toward people," "more nicer and respectful," "how to meet new people, how to talk to people when you go on an interview, not to chew gum or have smoke smell on you." BRIDGE persisters cited similar benefits: "how to get a job and use your time wisely," "banking and how to deposit the money" and "how to get along with adults."

Both leavers and persisters also appreciated some of the academic experiences. "I just liked working on computers," a STEP leaver explained, "playing on computers, playing games. They tested you to see what level you're on, then they give you stuff." A BRIDGE persister liked her reading class because "they show us things we can read about. You can read about different things." Another leaver liked the focus on work in his classroom: "I liked the class, everyone working during the class. If you had to study for a test, you had a whole hour to do it."

For many leavers and persisters, the most positive aspects arose from a feeling of togetherness in the classroom. "It was like teamwork, people helping out each other," a leaver explained. "The teachers helping, trying to get your attitude straightened out." "It was like a family," according to a persister. "You could say anything you wanted."

Some leavers also joined persisters in praising positive aspects of certain teachers. One STEP leaver was especially complimentary toward his teacher, who "was a real nice lady and she made all the directions clear and correct, and she was straightforward with you. Nobody was the clown of the class in her room. Everybody just maintained control because she was nice."

However, most praise for teachers came from persisters. A persister said of the same teacher:

> She would bring us cookies every day, she would bring us cookies and something to drink and she'd treat us like we're in the third grade. It was just fine. We'd play twenty questions and get points. We worked for pennies.

Another persister echoed this positive assessment: "She always made it like an adventure every time we came in. Win the pennies." A BRIDGE persister who had a poor teacher admired her new teacher's competence: "The teacher is better and she knows what she is doing. She knows how to work with students because she used to work in the army." A persister who found himself in a landscaping job "lifting rocks" appreciated his supervisor, who was "cool, super cool. He used to give us tee shirts and stuff. He let me work an extra week to make more money."

"A TWO-WAY STREET": THE PROCESS OF STAYING AND LEAVING

Even when they are discussing termination, the distinction between leavers and persisters is unclear. Most leavers held on beyond their initial dissatisfaction with a program and most persisters had at some time considered quitting. Reasons given by each indicate considerable thought given by both groups to the staying and leaving process.

"Getting on My Nerves": Leavers

Because student accounts of why they left a program vary significantly by site, the following discussion has been organized geographically. In one program, designated here as Site A, students left because of dissatisfaction with a teacher; at Site B, students attributed departure decisions to frustrations with program operators; at Site C, most students left for reasons extrinsic to the program.

Site A

Three leavers from the BRIDGE program in Site A took part in the focus group. All were male and all had begun to think about leaving two or three weeks into the program. Two of the three stayed in the program two semesters. One said he had talked to a counselor, who didn't believe his complaints about the classroom. Another spoke to a counselor who reminded him of the contract he had signed committing himself to the class.

When asked why they eventually left, one gave the following explanation:

> First teacher's OK, then the second teacher, she started getting on my nerves, so she didn't do much, show us and go about our business. I don't think that was fair. When she first came, they told us we were really going to like her. When she got there, she wasn't cooked up like she was supposed to be.

This student had evidently managed to make a connection with the first teacher but was never able to form an attachment to his replacement. When his expectations for classroom improvement were not fulfilled, he quit the program.

The third leaver at this site quit when asked to participate over the summer, a time when he expected to be away.

Site B

Most leavers at Site B had also contemplated quitting for some time before actually doing so. What held them in the program? One participant said he didn't quit on first impulse because he didn't want to disappoint his mother. Another said she didn't quit because she didn't want to return to a very unpopular social studies class. Other leavers cited the following motivations for staying: "I stayed because I was 15 years old and I knew I couldn't get no job, and this was good, the money"; "I stayed because there was people here that I got along with"; "I got one check, and it was looking kinda right, to have some money for a change. That's the only reason why I stayed."

Eventually, frustrations that had accumulated during the program reached a breaking point. One male youth described how he lost $60 because his supervisor lost his timesheet. He hung on for three to four weeks but couldn't forget the incident and finally quit. Several participants left town for the summer or school year. One male participant was expelled from school. One female student woke up one morning, got into a fight with her grandmother and "just left." "They knew I was leaving," she explained. "They just didn't know when."

Site C

Leavers from Site C gave nonprogrammatic reasons for leaving. A male youth explained that he was working two jobs he found during the second STEP summer, adding that he would have lost money going back to STEP. A young woman said that a hernia prevented her from working. When told by the program that she would be terminated if she didn't return to work, she became angry and refused to participate further. Another young woman left because she wanted to stay at home after having a baby. She received several calls from staff urging her to continue, but she refused. Another student joined Upward Bound.

"Keep Stickin' At It": Persisters

Most persisters said that at some point they had considered leaving. A STEP persister almost quit when "they was slow with our checks." A BRIDGE persister described the program as a two-way street. "You move ahead, then back." As did leavers, persisters complained about boredom, early morning classes, teachers, travel and food. Why did they stay? Most mentioned grades, paychecks, a realistic appraisal of other options or personal determination.

For some persisters, academic goals overshadowed all the drawbacks of the program. A BRIDGE persister who considered leaving because she disliked her teacher decided to stay to improve her grades. "What changed my mind was my grades," she explained. "My grades were OK, but I wanted them higher. It's like I tried to forget about what [the teacher] said and just go ahead."

A STEP persister held on despite classroom boredom because he wanted academic credit:

> I thought about leaving because sometimes it really got boring in the classroom. I thought about leaving but then I decided you can't leave because you need the credit. The modules were too long. Some were easy, some were hard, but they pushed you through it. But I stayed in because I needed the credit.

Other persisters decided to stay after they reviewed the alternatives. These students typically said that they continued in the program because "there was nothing else to do." One student, who had disliked the summer program in BRIDGE, agreed to attend in the fall because he would "have to get up anyway." Another student's appraisal of his alternatives was reinforced by her mother: "I got sick of the lady calling and I was at the point I was going to leave, and my mom said I should just stay. Ain't

goin' to be doin' nothin' else." Another student stayed in the program because of the monetary incentive:

> All my friends was working and there wasn't nothing to do at the house. They all had money and could go shopping in the weekend but every other weekend you don't have nothing, you have to depend on your mom. I wanted to work.

For other students, however, staying in the program represented a challenge in itself. As one BRIDGE persister put it, "That's the challenge, just to stay with it, you can tolerate it, see how long you can last when it seems to be getting worse. Most people, they give up.

Another BRIDGE persister described how "staying with it" represented a personal challenge for him: "Just to go through with it, to be able to do it. I ain't ever stayed with anything. I give up. This is kind of boring, but I plan on staying with it because I plan on getting this job by myself."

A student who described BRIDGE as "like a relationship" stayed because "I don't think it's right to get on and off stuff and not stick with one thing."

For these students, the boredom and frustrations of the program represented a challenge to which they felt equal. Along with academic and work goals, they appear to have constructed the goal of program completion. Even when the program was most discouraging, these students appear to have been able to hang on. As one student, who said her teacher was incompetent, described it: "Somethin' just said keep stickin' at it, he might get fired or somethin'." She outlasted her teacher, who was eventually transferred to another school.

IV. "JUST HOLD ON": OUT-OF-SCHOOL LEAVERS AND PERSISTERS

Length-of-stay in corps programs varied widely among both leavers and persisters who participated in focus groups. Groups contained both leavers and persisters who had been enrolled for three months or less, and who had been enrolled for one year or longer. Leavers and persisters differed absolutely only in terms of current enrollment status.

Therefore, comparisons between leavers and persisters cannot be drawn from these data. Instead, aspects of programs that youth found rewarding or stressful will be identified. Since nearly all participants considered leaving, possible reasons for staying and leaving will be explored.

"SOMETHING FOR MYSELF": PROGRAM ENTRY

"The Last Train": Joining the Program

Youth's decisions to join a youth service corps were usually made after considerable reflection. Reasons for joining that youth cited included a desire to acquire a specific vocational or academic credential, a determination to reverse a pattern of school and work failure, or a search for a transitional experience into adulthood.

Youth who entered the corps looking for skill training usually knew exactly what they wanted. A male youth who had been working for a park district on the West Coast signed on because he wanted to be a park ranger and his boss told him that park districts often hire corps graduates. He was still enrolled after two years, though he had transferred to warehouse management. A young woman who was still in the program after nine months had quit a job in a library because of a lifelong dream of being a fire-fighter, a role she would assume in the corps.

Others joined for the educational benefits. A Jamaican immigrant who had always planned on attending college signed up when she realized how expensive college would be. An urban high school senior who was failing most of her classes enrolled to get her GED. An Eastern high school graduate signed up after learning about the college scholarship that is awarded to corps graduates.

Still others joined because of a determination to reverse a pattern of failure. One woman who stayed in the program for two years had initially planned "to wait until [she] got her life straightened out" before she signed on; when that didn't happen, she joined anyway. Several urban youth enrolled as an alternative to dropping out of school in their senior year. Another corpsmember lost his job as a bus driver, lost his "place" and

"couldn't seem to come back up." Although some friends of his had joined and quit, he eventually signed on because things weren't improving for him. He was still enrolled after nine months.

For other youth, the corps presented a real alternative to a life of drug use. Several said that before enrolling, they had reached a point at which they were "saturated or burned out" by drugs. As a seven-month male recruit put it:

> My life was going nowhere, didn't finish high school, doing a lot of drugs, and I had various jobs and I couldn't keep the jobs and I was going from place to place. And I finally decided I need to do something. And I sobered up and everything and I was staying with my grandparents, and they suggested the corps. I looked in the paper and they had an orientation, and I said, well, what am I going to do? I went to the orientation and it sounded really good. I like the corps; it's teaching me a lot and I'm trying to get experience for when I leave.

For corpsmembers who had drug problems, a realization that they "just couldn't make it out there" usually preceded enrollment.

For many youth, entry into the corps represented nothing more or less than a transition into adulthood. Often, these youth had either held jobs they found unsatisfying, or realized their current skill level would provide only a limited income. A West Coast woman decided she "had to get serious" after several years of "not going anywhere or doing anything"; she saw the advertisements, knew she was the right age and decided to "go off and start doing something for myself." A young woman who had a baby joined when she realized the jobs she was interviewing for couldn't support both her and the baby; her goals in the corps included job training and "some help in finding what kind of job I want." A corpsmember who had "floated around for a couple of months" and worked at a car dealership realized "everyone there was older" and that he didn't really fit in. He wanted a change. A corpsmember who joined at age 23 told a longer story:

> Basically I can do anything, fix anything. I've been a carpenter, but to go to an employer, put out an application. I could say that I could do this stuff, but I've got nothing concrete like paperwork to back it up. So I decided, hey, hard work, low pay, miserable conditions. I figure I've been doing that for the last six years anyway. I wanted to get up into the mountains, do some fishing. Basically, I thought I'd get something out of it, but I didn't know what it was at the time. I ended up at a center where they really have a lot of opportunities as far as schooling, so

> I've just been grabbing everything I could, milking the program for everything it's worth.

Thirteen months after signing on, this youth described what may be the necessary preconditions for program success: a realistic appraisal of his circumstances at entry, a realistic assessment of program benefits, goals that could be achieved in the program, and an ability to extract program benefits--to "milk the program for all it's worth."

Finally, many youth admitted that they joined the corps with only a short-term commitment in mind. A female corpsmember worried at enrollment "was I the right person for this;" however, she had no other job for the summer and figured she could always drop out. To her surprise, she liked the corps and stayed. A West Coast high school graduate intended to stay for only six months; she was still participating 10 months after enrollment. Another high school graduate decided he didn't want to attend college:

> I came in and said I would only stay for four months and then go to school. Then I got in, went out on the grade, loved it, so I said I'd stay in for six months. Then it got to a year, then I got promoted to crew leader and was loving it more every minute so I decided to stay in. It's just a break from all the schoolwork.

At the time of his focus group interview, his "break" had lasted three years.

"The Stone Truth": Recruitment

Most recruits were familiar with corps programs long before they considered enrollment. Many had seen TV or newspaper commercials, others had heard advertisements on the radio, and many had relatives who suggested it to them. Still others were introduced to the programs by unemployment offices or by recruiters who visited schools.

But by far the greatest source of recruitment information was friends. Many youth knew present or former recruits, who publicized the program by telling friends, "if you can make it here a year, you can make it anywhere." Some youth who were initially reluctant to join did so with a friend.

Few participants complained about blatant discrepancies between program publicity and delivery. Several urban recruits who complained about the citywide program agreed that the "upstate" training phase had been fairly represented. Most participants agreed with the West Coast woman who said, "Application says fighting fires and floods and get up at 6 a.m. You figure that was a lie, but you get there and that's the stone truth."

"Equal Opportunity Employment": Selection

Although many youth expressed tension related to the social composition of the corps, none thought the initial selection process should be more restrictive. Most agreed with the West Coast woman who said "the door is pretty open and I think that's the way it should be." Few found the open-door policy stigmatizing. Another West Coast woman reported that the sight of all types of people at the recruiting office made her feel included. "It looked like fun, she said." They got punk rockers in here; they got fun boys. It can't be too bad. I figure, well, I'm an outcast."

A woman who had heard that the corps was "a place for convicts" found "it was beautiful compared to what I was expecting." Urban, East Coast youth who noticed that the corps took "people coming in from off the street, guys convicted of certain offenses" also remembered that everyone was finger-printed and tested for drugs during initial screening. Another youth had explained the open admissions policy to a friend he was trying to recruit, who "hangs out on the corner smoking this, smoking that."

"ONE BIG FAMILY": POSITIVE INCENTIVES

Team Affiliation

When asked to evaluate their youth corps experience, most participants talked about the feeling of "family" they experienced with their peers in the corps. A corpsmember spoke for many when he said:

> Our center's a family. You learn to work out your problems, you never take them to work. A lot of people work real hard. There's injuries, sickness; it's not the cleanest, healthiest living conditions. You've got to get along. There's 40 of us cramped around there.

For many corpsmembers, the experience of "family" compensated for the "hard work, low pay, miserable conditions" they found in the program. For some, this experience of togetherness meant that they had been able to transcend initial feelings of alienation. As a female corpsmember put it:

> I like the way that you start off and you don't know these people and you don't care too much about them, but in the end you work as a team and you know as you all graduate you are crying. I just hated this person a few months ago, but it brings you together as one. All ethnic areas.

Another woman described her summer team as "almost like sisters or brothers or cousins. All like three stooges, except there were 15 of us."

This strong, positive affiliation with a team affected youth's reaction to program incentives and policies in several ways. First, visible identifiers, such as stripes, hats and uniforms, were positive incentives for most youth. One woman said that when she got her six-month stripes, "I felt good. Makes you want to stick your head up." A corpsmember described how his feelings about his uniform changed as his group pride developed: "It took me a long time to be proud of the uniform, which is proud of the corps oath. But it's not the uniform itself that you have to be proud of, it's what it stands for."

Several youth reported that the uniform gave them a positive identification in the community, even when they were misidentified as fast-food employees or work-release prisoners by the public. "Once you are in that community for a certain amount of time, then you earn their respect," one recruit noted proudly. "When they see what you're really about, they realize that you're not such a bad group of kids."

Second, many urban youth regretted losing the closeness of the "upstate" residential program when they returned to the nonresidential program in the city. "We had that security upstate," one woman explained, but then "they split us up, you have to start all over again." "It was like a motley crew," another woman explained of her urban program, "and we never really developed that closeness. Even now I don't know some corpsmembers." "The reason I don't like this project," another woman explained, "is because the team don't spend time together. They put us in two places, they splitting us in two places."

Third, most corpsmembers advocated a "get tough" attitude toward problem corpsmembers. Many youth did not believe that peer pressure was enough to straighten out some of the "rotten apples" in the program. The solution was up to staff: "They've got too many people here that don't belong here and they're not quick enough about getting rid of them." A corpsmember advised staff to "weed them out, because they're messing up for everybody else." One woman had a man on her team who had tried to stab his mother. He was a good worker and a good student until he became angry and began to issue threats, she explained. "You don't need people like that," she observed. "They need something, but it's not the corps."

Finally, youth were extremely sensitive to their relationship with corps staff, whom many saw as the key to their commitment to their team. As one youth put it, "If you can't have reliable staff, you aren't going to have reliable recruits." Youth were

consistent on qualities they admired and disliked in staff. "A good one would deal with you on a one-to-one basis, very respectfully, as a good friend," explained one youth. "They don't put you down or feel they are more above," explained another. Another youth described the positive attributes of a leader he admired: "He encouraged me a lot to do better, he knew I could be a better corpsmember." Another recruit expressed the same thought somewhat differently: "He brings his level down to us. Like when we are on projects, he gets involved, he gets his hands dirty. And if you have problems, you could go to him and show him points."

In contrast, leaders who acted "like a superior figure" elicited little respect. "They don't gotta be acting like they're superior to the kid," explained a one woman. "They're there as friends." For another youth, the leader's failure arose from her detachment from team accomplishments: "She acts like she doesn't appreciate anything the team does."

Vocational Experience

West Coast youth were proud of vocational skills learned "on the grade," or in their conservation work. Women were especially proud of their accomplishments; a Hispanic woman boasted "I am capable to do things I never think I can do. Hard work, how to install doors and windows." A young mother testified that she had "learned how to use tools I never heard of before." Another woman testified that she had learned "to put out the effort and try something new." Her new skills included basic carpentry, forest fire-fighting, flood control and "how to dig the hell out of a ditch."

In contrast, many urban youth reported feeling stressed by work in social agencies. As one woman noted, "In the field, there's different circumstances that aren't so controlled like they are up in training." As a result, youth are exposed to some uncomfortable experiences. One male youth described a time when he felt "drained" at his site: "When they put us in the hospital, it was totally dark. They put us from one mental project to another. It was draining. After working with people with Alzheimer's, it drained you."

One woman was stressed by her field supervisor as well as the clients. At her site, "the people that work there, they give you no respect." In addition, the clients, approximately 250 homeless men, "act like savages. They talk to you 'Oh, Baby.'" A woman who worked at a nursing home was upset because the nurses gave the patients "no respect." She and her focus group became very animated talking about their difficulties with the nurses at the site.

Incentives

Many youth suggested higher pay and/or more frequent raises as the most attractive incentive. Nonmonetary suggestions included awards for "crew member of the month," special privileges for achievement, competition among the teams, tickets to concerts and sports events, and trophies. Urban youth reported a need for reimbursement for transportation costs to and from their sites.

Youth also had suggestions for programmatic improvements. One East Coast youth suggested a midyear training program similar to the "upstate" orientation. Several West Coast youth requested "more personal development-type things to help people really cross over, teaching you how to cope." They also suggested more help to "get out of the corps. There's people that spend their life in the corps. They're scared to leave." Others felt strongly that rules should be made uniform across sites. "Be fair and consistent," advised one young woman.

"HANG WITH SOMETHING": STAYING AND LEAVING

Reasons youth gave for wanting to leave and deciding to stay were consistent across the corps, and also among both those currently enrolled and those who had terminated.

Leaving

Youth frequently wanted to quit the corps when they evaluated their monthly pay. One recruit was angered by the discrepancy between her wages and living conditions and her work output:

> You get pissed off at work and you think about how much you're making to sleep in a room with five other people, eat shit food. The miserable conditions is what really screws me around. You think, "I'm paying for this?"

One two-year veteran did leave when he was hired for a job that offered substantially better wages. Another youth needed the money but stayed on because of the academic opportunities:

> I was going to leave at six months because I needed more money, but then I realized corps had more opportunities for school. They had a college preparatory program, preparing you for college, and they have the college classes.

This young woman went on to explain that she was currently enrolled in a course she enjoyed in the corps.

However, youth were most likely to think about leaving when they were stressed by social conditions and conflicts with staff. A new recruit almost quit after a female at her center nearly died from a drug overdose. One youth did quit because "little by little, our team was breaking up" and he could not "relate to [his] team leader because he would talk over your head, not to your level." Another youth noted that staying in the program was especially difficult when there was staff turnover; he wanted to leave "when new people come in staff positions and try to change things, when I've been in two years before them."

Staying

When asked to reflect on why they had stayed, some youth mentioned their determination to earn a GED, get job experience and earn a college scholarship. Others found benefits within the program itself. "I liked what I was doing," said one. "I was doing stuff that I love to do. They've given me the opportunity to advance. From the beginning, I wanted to be a crew supervisor." This recruit responded not only to the work, which she enjoyed, but also to the prospect of promotion within the ranks.

Others found that other goals were being met in the program, as described by one youth: "I liked my first project, which was working with shelter kids. And for my GED, and I got to like school, so I stayed."

For most youth, however, staff support and team spirit forged the commitment to stay. One woman stayed because of a supervisor who told her, "'just take this and it'll be better after things get straightened out.' I thought, 'just hold on.'" Another youth found that "there's support here. You have your team leader, you have everyone who knows you at the office."

The experiences of two female corpsmembers illustrate how social conditions can influence staying and leaving decisions. The first was transferred from her center, which she liked, to one where she could get more specific skill training. When she found she disliked the second center, she at first decided to "stick it out." She did so for a month and a half before deciding that this new experience was "too difficult." Despite considerable administrative resistance, she persevered in her determination to transfer back to her original center where she concluded her enrollment.

The second woman transferred "from a center where they had rules you all knew to a center where the rules weren't enforced." This new center "made [me] hate the corps for six months." She quit, but remembered how much she had liked her first center, which she rejoined. Eventually, she was made a special corpsmember in charge of recruitment.

Both these women had positive experiences initially in the corps and voluntarily transferred to another center, where they found an alien social environment. Fortunately, both remembered their prior positive experience and reenrolled in their original center.

For other corpsmembers, the decision to stay arose from a determination to finish what they had started. As an eight-month veteran put it, she was staying:

> Because it's something I'm proving to myself. I dropped out of college prep school. I quit this, I quit that because it wasn't my choice. This is something I can say to myself, I joined that shitty program and I completed it.

For many youth, completion of the one-year corps program represented their first experience in achieving a goal. For some, the knowledge that they had outlasted many of their peers was exhilarating. These youth proudly cited the miserable conditions they had endured in contrast to those who had "chickened out." "People don't last that long during the winter when it rains," one youth explained. "If you can take that, you can take anything." Or, as another youth said of drug users in the corps, "they make me look better."

V. FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

We began this investigation by raising a series of questions about attrition in dropout prevention and youth corps programs. To answer these questions, we have tried to discover how commitments are made from youth's perspective. We analyzed verbal reports from a series of focus groups composed of youth who had either completed or quit a dropout prevention program or youth corps.

Specifically, we wanted to find out why some youth from disadvantaged backgrounds enroll in special programs and why other youth from similar backgrounds pass them by. Once enrolled, why do some youth complete a program while others from similar backgrounds leave prematurely? Are youth more vulnerable to attrition at certain points in a program? Do leavers and persisters experience a similar sequence of steps in program affiliation? Finally, do youth's reports suggest ways in which planners can modify programs to increase completion rates and reduce youth's vulnerability to attrition? In this chapter, we present our findings and recommendations, first for in-school youth, then for out-of-school youth.

IN-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

One might expect that the careers of leavers and persisters would begin to diverge at enrollment, with persisters following one trajectory and leavers another. Instead leavers and persisters express remarkably similar reactions to all phases of program participation. They are attracted by the same inducements, respond positively to the same in-program incentives and react negatively to the same events. Almost all persisters have at some time considered leaving; and almost all leavers delayed their departure beyond their initial dissatisfaction. Similar in the socioeconomic characteristics that place them at risk for school failure, leavers and persisters sound alike when asked to describe their experiences in special programs. They differ only in their tolerance for programmatic frustrations.

Incentives to Enroll

Youth said they enrolled for many reasons that conform with planners' expectations. They were attracted to the academic component with its promise of higher grades and school credit; they were eager for job experience; and they wanted to earn money at a time in their lives when they had few other options for doing so. The lesson for program planners is that these incentives do have appeal for many at-risk teens.

For several students, however, there was a less obvious incentive to enroll--encouragement from parents. Teens gave several reasons why parents had encouraged them to join: "She tell me to get out and make some money;" they "didn't want me to be goofin' around during the summertime;" and "it just sounded like fun and my mom she really wanted me to go." These comments suggest that parental encouragement may motivate some teens to enroll. Parents might be an underutilized resource in the effort to enroll students in dropout prevention programs.

Once they had joined, many students experienced considerable stress in reconciling differences between prior expectations and the reality of program operations. Youth's reports on their adjustment to programs strongly suggest that they are vulnerable to attrition during the initial phase of program participation. This vulnerability often results from differences between youth's expectations and program reality.

These differences occur for several reasons. First, unrealistic promises may have been made by school personnel to attract students and fill classroom quotas. As a STEP leaver put it, "they pumped you up, but once you got there it wasn't half of what you thought." Second, even with clear explanations, some students may distort program descriptions. Consequently, these students might expect, shortly after enrollment, "good money, good schedules, good homework, learn a lot, and help you throughout the rest of the year."

Third, special programs for at-risk youth are difficult to implement. They are complicated, often involving nontraditional working alliances between businesses and schools, and they are usually exceptionally demanding of staff. Even under optimal conditions, promises of program components that were realistically made by staff and clearly understood by students may be slow to materialize. As a STEP persister put it, she was going to quit "when they was slow with our checks." She changed her mind when the checks arrived.

For these reasons, we recommend that the initial phase of a program be buttressed with additional incentives. These might include: recognition awards for surviving the initial phase; group sessions in which youth are encouraged to ventilate initial impressions; and individual sessions with counselors and parents to reconcile discrepancies between expectations and reality and help renew the initial commitment.

Incentives to Stay

Material incentives to stay in programs had a mixed effect on in-school students. For most students, monetary rewards were strong inducements to both enroll and remain in programs. Youth from

poverty backgrounds appreciated the opportunity to make money and were grateful when payments were made on a regular basis.

Nonmonetary material incentives, however, were often a negative factor. In cities where a dropout prevention program was featured in newspapers or on TV, students were reluctant to wear program tee shirts for fear of name-calling by peers. Such incentives as trips and gift certificates to local fast-food emporia were well-received; other incentives, such as buttons, tapes and notebooks, found a mixed response.

For this reason, we recommend that teachers and planners give careful thought to determining which material incentives can build program affiliation without stigmatizing the target group. This recommendation has two facets. First, administrators who are eager to capitalize on positive publicity accruing from a project should weigh publicity gains against individual costs. Many youth were sensitive to having been characterized as dropout-prone by the press while they were still enrolled in school. Therefore, they were careful to hide any visible indication of program affiliation.

Second, administrators and teachers might consider the positive benefits of material incentives that do not increase project visibility. Youth responded positively to field trips and contests in the classroom; picnics, parent workshops, and newsletters are also worth considering. The challenge of effectively structuring material incentives will be especially critical for new programs, which do not have a prior reputation to help attract and hold students.

Students were also positively impressed by learning experiences in the classroom. Many of these experiences carried tangible rewards of higher grades or academic credit. Others had practical value, such as contraceptive information and job-readiness skills. For planners, these findings justify efforts to make curricula relevant to youth and to structure academic rewards so that they recognize real effort.

Finally, although none of the students interviewed was motivated to join a program to gain close and caring relationships, many mentioned either a relationship with a teacher or supervisor or the team spirit within their class as the most positive aspect of program participation. Persisters were especially articulate in describing the positive effect a teacher had on a class, suggesting that these teachers may have been instrumental in reinforcing the initial commitment students made to programs.

Attributes that made a teacher attractive included an ability to maintain classroom control, an ability to explain material clearly so that students understand and learn, and an ability to make learning fun. Admired teachers made learning "like an

adventure," "encouraged" individuals, "made all the directions clear and correct," or "knew how to work with students" because of prior experience in the army. A work supervisor became important to a male student when he made the job of lifting rocks fun and unexpectedly remunerative. However, students give no indication that any of these relationships involved after-school contact; indeed, many found teacher calls to the home annoying. The connection that mattered occurred in the classroom or at the worksite.

Students were equally clear about the importance of a feeling of classroom cohesiveness. Desirable classes felt "like a team;" providing a valuable experience in belonging that was sadly lost for some BRIDGE students when their class was combined with "regular school" and no longer felt "as much like a family."

For these reasons, we recommend that program planners give highest priority to teacher selection. Essential qualities should include not only prior experience in teaching at-risk youth, but also the personal qualities by which some teachers communicate enthusiasm for learning and caring for students. Admittedly, this professional and personal package can be a rare commodity, and some programs may have to conduct extended searches or special training workshops to recruit qualified candidates. However, youth's reports suggest that the success or failure of a dropout-prevention program may directly depend on its teachers and their ability to establish rapport with students.

Incentives to Leave

Three findings about leavers emerge from the focus group data. The first is that few leavers leave a program impulsively. Final decisions to leave were arrived at only after a succession of frustrations and failures, many of which were reported to program authorities. This interval between dissatisfaction and termination would appear to open a window of opportunity for interventions to promote staying. Regular conferences between a counselor and/or teacher and students and parents might identify potential leavers. Programmatic problems related to termination could be addressed and potentially rectified.

Second, a substantial number of in-school departures result from situations that are extrinsic to the program. Some students move or take out-of-state vacations; young women occasionally have babies; some youth encounter health problems; still others are expelled from school. Because many of these causes are associated with the socioeconomic profile of at-risk students, they may be impossible to curtail.

Finally, these data suggest that a subtle difference between leavers and persisters may emerge under pressure. Although

persisters are as aware of programmatic shortcomings as leavers, their personal goals and values can reinforce their decision to stay. At site A, where an entire class was exposed to a teacher who "wasn't all that good" for several months, leavers decided to quit within weeks of enrollment. In contrast, persisters were determined to "keep sticking at it," either because of hopes the teacher "might get fired or something," their own academic goals, or a conviction that it is wrong "to get on and off stuff and not stick with one thing." According to their own reports, persisters have a reservoir of reasons for staying that they reach into whenever they want to leave.

This difference between leavers and persisters raises questions about motivational differences that are intrinsic to the individual. Persisters appear to have well-defined goals that create a teflon-like shield between themselves and program frustrations. Persisters also appear to have recognized a value in commitment, so that they feel proud in staying on when others leave. Finally, persisters appear to have assessed both the strengths and weaknesses of a program and decided that its benefits outweigh its drawbacks.

These findings suggest a dichotomy between leavers and persisters that may be misleading. A more likely configuration would be a continuum of balance points between personal motivation and program operation. Most probably, the fulcrum between goals and program rests at a different point for each individual. In addition, the fulcrum would shift as programs improved or declined, thus reinforcing or discouraging motivation. The fulcrum would also shift as an individual's personal circumstances changed, thereby enhancing or detracting from the attractiveness of programs as means to achievable ends.

It follows then that teachers and counselors associated with programs for at-risk youth must be sensitive to differences between students. Some students may need special reinforcement to complete a curriculum; for others, the prospect of improved grades and a high school diploma may provide adequate incentive. The challenge for teachers and administrators is to identify individual differences and, when possible, adapt program operations without compromising program goals.

OUT-OF-SCHOOL PROGRAMS

Several factors differentiate youth in youth corps programs from youth in dropout-prevention programs. First, corps youth are typically between the ages of 18 and 23, older than most in-school youth. Because of their age, they can work, as many have, or they can enlist in the military or Job Corps. Therefore, their decision to enroll represents a choice of one alternative over several. In addition, older youth have accumulated additional years of life experience that may have shifted their

perspective on their strengths and limitations and fostered an awareness of personal goals.

Second, the youth corps programs studied have been in existence for several years and are therefore more mature than the two dropout-prevention programs represented here. With maturity has come a reputation promulgated by the media and former recruits. Youth enrolling in these programs therefore expect the "hard work, low pay, miserable conditions" they find after enrollment.

Finally, shortly after enrollment, most recruits are required to endure an orientation that involves strenuous exercise in a residential setting. The combination of exhausting work and intense closeness with peers and staff provides a clear transition into the program. Close bonds are forged that can buffer against discomfort and disappointment, and heightened awareness of program goals and pride in surmounting hurdles can reinforce the initial commitment. The example of youth who quit during orientation can strengthen an individual's confidence in his or her own ability to tolerate stress and complete a program. Nevertheless, youth do leave these programs after orientation, usually after five or six months. This section summarizes the reasons they give for enrolling, quitting and staying, and presents our recommendations.

Incentives to Enroll

Unlike most youth in dropout prevention programs, youth corps recruits are usually self-motivated to enroll. Typically, they have exhausted all other options and have heard about the corps from friends. Although other choices are available, the corps looks like the best fit with their needs. An alternative midway between the military and the Job Corps, corps offer some of the prestige of the military without the lengthy required commitment, and some of the job training of the Job Corps without the associated stigma.

Most recruits reported that they were attracted by the lack of entrance requirements. For many youth who had dropped out of traditional achievement tracks, the open-door admissions policy was an inducement. These youth also found the easy exit an appealing alternative to the military, where long-term commitments are required.

Finally, many youth seem to be attracted by the nonspecific program mix. Although some said they joined to learn a specific skill, such as fire-fighting or landscaping, or to get a GED, many others apparently sought nothing more specific than the challenge of a new and demanding experience or the acquisition of job-readiness skills. Parenthetically, although the corps are service-oriented organizations that perform conservation and

human service work, almost none of the recruits reported enrolling for altruistic reasons.

These observations strike at the heart of the current debate over the social complexion of the youth corps. The twin policies of open admissions and nonspecific program mix appear to have appealed to a sector of youth who might not otherwise find a niche in the social landscape. By altering their profile to attract middle-class youth, who have multiple options in young adulthood, the corps might lose its appeal for youth for whom few other options exist. Planners will therefore need to evaluate tradeoffs when they contemplate changing admissions or programmatic policies.

Incentives to Stay or Leave

Material Incentives

Perhaps because so many youth corps recruits come from underprivileged backgrounds, material incentives--including nonmonetary recognition of longevity and achievement, as well as monetary compensation for service--have a strong appeal.

Most corps youth seemed acutely sensitive to the ladder of stripes and colored hats that signified advancement in the corps. Many strongly aspired to make their way up the ladder, and some even said that the incentive to rise in the ranks held them in the corps beyond their initial commitment.

Whether financial compensation helps reduce or delay attrition is unclear, however. Many of the youth interviewed complained bitterly about their wages and the slow rate at which they got increments. For in the nonresidential urban program, the personal hardship imposed by the low wages seems to be particularly severe.

Nevertheless, the data from these groups do not indicate that any youth left a corps in the first year to earn higher wages. These findings may be an artifact of the study design. It may be that youth for whom the wages represented a hardship were not available to participate in focus groups because they had left the corps and were now working. Also, youth under financial pressure may have failed to enroll, leaving available for the focus group study only youth for whom finances were a secondary concern. Therefore, this study may not present a conclusive picture of the role monetary incentives play in holding youth in programs.

Relationships

Youth interviewed for this study frequently cited a direct connection between a decision to stay or leave and relationships with team and staff. One woman stayed because a supervisor told

her, "just take this and it'll be better after things get straightened out." Two women transferred to new centers, then transferred back to be with their team. Another youth quit because "little by little our team was breaking up" and he could not relate to his new team leader.

Why relationships hold such importance for corps youth can only be suggested from these data. Many youth enroll in the corps after several years of independence, during which time they have tested their personal resources and often found them wanting. Many have dropped out of school, found and lost jobs, had a baby, or gotten into drugs. They come into the corps with nonspecific but highly personal goals for growth and development. Success for them depends on how well they are able to alter the sense of self that has accompanied failure. This search for personal growth may explain why many youth describe their commitment in personal terms, as did the youth who said, "I'd be down [if I quit] and I don't want to go down, I want to go up until the day I die." For these youth, the corps offers an opportunity to experience a positive sense of self, even as they are acquiring credentials for mainstream life.

The importance of the social experience for corps youth presents a special challenge for staff. In addition to their program tasks, they assume the daunting task of becoming mentors to youth who are dependent on their guidance while often resentful of it. Friction between staff and youth is inevitable in settings where all are stressed by "hard work, low pay, miserable conditions." Failure to connect will result from pressures on staff as well as demands made by youth. Successful connections that solidify youth's commitment to the corps must reflect staff's efforts as well as youth's resilience.

For this reason, we recommend that program planners provide ongoing support and training to corps staff. Staff frequently need special training to understand the needs of at-risk youth and develop effective communication strategies that will forge working alliances. Staff should be trained to lead group meetings, identify and prevent problems, and enforce rules fairly and consistently. Because staff are understandably stressed by this work, they also need support and guidance in the form of frequent workshops and meetings.

The social function of the corps also places a special burden on nonresidential programs, in which group experience is diluted by the relatively few hours a team spends together. Urban youth complained relatively little about the difficult conditions at their upstate orientation. Instead, they discussed with regret the loss of team feeling they had enjoyed upstate. "It was like a motley crew and we never really developed that closeness," one woman explained. "The reason I don't like this project is,

because the team don't spend time together, they splitting us in two places," complained another.
Therefore, we recommend that planners consider additional ways to reinforce team affiliation. Achievement and longevity awards could be instituted to recognize stages of team affiliation. Team competitions, newsletters, "crew leader of the month" awards, and tickets to special events were repeatedly suggested by focus group participants. Some older youth requested help with communication skills with peers, an activity that could be integrated into group awareness exercises. Nonresidential programs should consider tradeoffs when assigning youth to projects where they work independently of their team.

Finally, corps youth's insistence on an open-door admissions policy and their equally hard line in favor of expelling "rotten apples" suggest that program quitters may play a positive role in reinforcing group cohesion. For youth who feel they have caught "the last train," hanging on while others visibly fail may provide a new opportunity for self-definition. Program quitters may unwittingly provide persisters with an opportunity to differentiate themselves from their prior pattern of self-defeating behaviors. In this context, program attrition may be a necessary cost of promoting the group cohesion that allows some at-risk youth to succeed.